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The Performance of Militaries in Humanitarian Demining

Studies indicate that humanitarian demining under civilian oversight is safer and more cost-efficient than humanitarian demining under military oversight. This article provides examples supporting such evidence, cites possible exceptions, and explores reasons for performance inadequacies in military demining units.

by Ted Paterson [Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining]

There are few documented examples of militaries performing efficient and effective humanitarian demining¹ when working under a military chain of command. The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining found only a handful of studies in which a direct comparison could be made between HD by militaries versus nongovernmental organizations or commercial firms.²

calculated for both area demining and road demining tasks, and are summarized in Table 1 below. In brief, demining by military units was between 25 and 60 times more expensive than demining by civilian contractors working in the same country at the same time, and on similar tasks. In addition, U.N. peacekeeping forces did not demine to International Mine Action

Area demining	Military	Civilian	Unit Cost Ratio Military: Civilian
"Best case" for military	\$15.44/m ²	\$0.61/m ²	25 : 1
"Worst case" for military	\$47.00/m ²	\$0.79/m ²	60 : 1
Road demining			
"Best case" for military	\$25,543/km	\$727/km	35 : 1
"Worst case" for military	\$5.99/m ²	\$0.10/m ²	58 : 1

Table 1: Cost comparisons for humanitarian demining from Ethiopia and Eritrea

The studies surveyed concluded that military units performing HD were less productive, far more expensive and worked to lower safety standards. The clearest comparison derives from an evaluation of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea³ where similar tasks were conducted by demining units serving within the peacekeeping force and by civilian organizations working under commercial contracts. Cost-effectiveness comparisons were

Standards in 2004,⁴ and as areas not demined to IMAS are not considered safe for civilian use by organizations that adhere to IMAS, the demined areas may have needed re-clearance before release. Evidence also shows that military units were less effective than civilian operators in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From March–June 1997, U.S. Special Operations Forces conducted training for 450 members of the Entity Armed Forces.⁵ The training was based on military procedures,

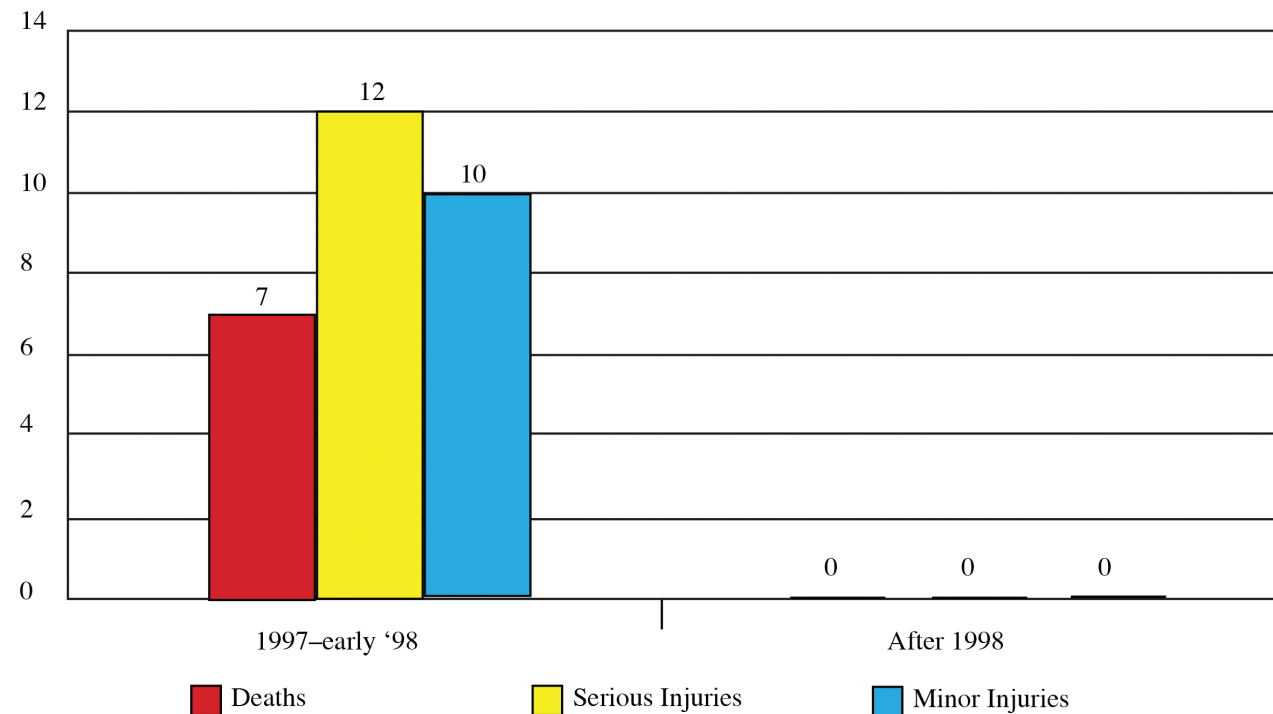


Deminers training for peacekeeping duties. PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG WARE

and the United Nations Mine Action Centre did not accredit the EAF for humanitarian demining. Approximately six months later, Special Operations Forces returned to deliver another series of training courses to new EAF recruits, this time working closely with UNMAC and using its humanitarian-demining training guidelines. Following this training, the EAF reached HD accreditation in June 1998. The graph on the next page summarizes the EAF demining casualties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From 1997 to early 1998, the person-

nel trained in military-demining procedures sustained 29 casualties, 19 of which resulted in death or serious injury. After 1998, the EAF personnel trained under UNMAC training guidelines for humanitarian demining and suffered no demining casualties from 1998–2001.⁶ Exceptions may be found in the future wherein military deminers, working under a military chain of command, will perform as well as or better than civilian operators. In Vietnam, for example, army demining units and military-owned firms conducted extensive

unexploded-ordnance survey and clearance operations in support of infrastructure and other investment projects.⁷ However, GICHD is unaware of any thorough comparison of costs or of Vietnamese demining standards relative to IMAS. Performance differentials documented by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea and in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not stem from a lack of skill on the part of military demining personnel, many of whom have gone on to successful careers with NGOs and commercial operators. In addition, military



Demining casualties of the Entity Armed Forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
GRAPHIC COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR/CISR

demining units working under civilian authorities have proven to be an effective solution in a number of countries, including Azerbaijan,⁸ Chile,⁹ Ethiopia¹⁰ and Yemen.¹¹ The key in such cases appears to be the existence of a board of civilian officials (such as a National Mine Action Authority) which sees demining as essential for the country. It ensures that capable mine-action managers are in place, along with incentives for these managers to deliver safe, efficient and effective demining services.

The finding that humanitarian demining is generally less productive and more costly when conducted by military units than by civilian operators is mirrored in the humanitarian-assistance field. For example, the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda concluded that "... military air transport is four to eight times more expensive than commercial air transport. Thus in those instances where military aircraft operated over the same routes as functioning road transport routes ... the use of military aircraft to carry cargos that could have travelled by road was between 20 and 40 times more expensive."^{12,13}

Such findings should not be a surprise. Militaries have a different mandate from civilian organizations. In military

operations, failure to achieve the principal objective can spell disaster for the unit, the entire military force and the nation as a whole. Accordingly, militaries spare no costs to achieve their strategic objectives, even if it means that performance on other measures—such as efficiency or cost per unit—is sacrificed. Military demining operations are not designed to be judged against the performance rules of the humanitarian-demining industry.

Increasingly, Western militaries have recognized that significant savings can be made by contracting civilian organizations to work under commercial incentives. They now make far greater use of civilian contractors for such tasks as transportation, facilities management and administration. Recent years have also seen a number of initiatives to enhance the contribution that military units make to humanitarian-demining operations. In November 2003, for example, the U.N. Security Council issued an important statement on mine action, including: "The Security Council recognizes the contribution that peacekeeping personnel can make in the areas of mine risk education and demining and calls upon troop-contributing countries, where appropriate, to train selected personnel to demine in accordance



Stockpile destruction in Sudan.
PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG WARE

with the International Mine Action Standards."¹⁴ Since the evaluation of the UNMEE Mine Action Coordination Centre, military demining units serving in U.N. peacekeeping missions have required accreditation from UNMAS and must conduct their operations in compliance with IMAS. Improvements have also been made in coordination and information exchange between military and civilian operators within peacekeeping missions. Efforts are also underway in a number of NATO member states toward the harmonization of mine-action doctrine and standards, at least within peacekeeping and stabilization operations, and within the context of humanitarian emergencies.

Situations remain in which military demining units working under a military chain of command should

or must be used, even though they would not be the cheapest or most productive solution. Such scenarios include operations in highly insecure environments and when very rapid emergency response is required, in which case militaries generally have far greater capacities than any civilian organization can muster. In other cases, fostering military-to-military contacts is the primary objective, and humanitarian-demining activities are simply a means to this end. Studies show that demining conducted under civilian oversight provides the safest, most effective and cost-efficient option. Thus, militaries should be trained to humanitarian standards and operate under civilian oversight when engaged in humanitarian-demining operations. ♦

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Ted Paterson has a background in international development, working with NGOs, research and education institutes, and consulting firms, as well as in an independent consultant capacity. He has been active in mine action since 1999, working mainly on socioeconomic and performance-management issues. Paterson joined the GICHD in 2004 and is Head of Evaluation and Policy Research. He has degrees in business, economics and development economics.

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